

EVERYDAY ANALYSIS  
SUBLATION MAGAZINE

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## **An Inhumane War: Ukraine, Animals, and Refugees**

**Bara Kolenc**

In February, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky described Russian operations against his country as "vile, cruel and inhuman". Taking this humanitarian perspective, the media was inundated with this master signifier: 'an inhumane war.' Killing civilians, not taking care of the wounded and sick, not respecting the rights of prisoners of war, and using weapons of mass destruction are considered to be signs of a war that is out-of-control, bestial, and insane. But there is something much stranger – and more telling - about calling a war 'inhumane'.

One immediate response calling into question this master signifier might be that, when we categorize one war as 'inhumane', we imply that there is another kind of war that might qualify as *humane*. Yet, how can one draw a line between the humane and the inhumane war? War is inhumane in its fundamentals, or so the liberal argument goes. In reality, there is another more important facet of this 'inhumane war' discourse.

Is the signifier of the 'inhumane war' unsettling because it is based upon the 'forbidden' presupposition that there *is* such thing as a humane war? Aren't we all well aware that war as such is inhumane, animalistic, and represents a regrettable digression on our path toward reaching the noble goals of the Enlightenment? And so, the Geneva conventions, which purport to maintain the so-called *dignity of man* and to protect basic human rights, are nothing but an ill-fated attempt to retain the blasphemous idea of a *humane war*?

### **A Dark Truth**

It is this awareness that feeds the hidden assumptions of the *rationalist pacifist disposition* which is exhibited in the correspondence between Einstein and Freud conducted prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. In this correspondence, sponsored by the *International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation* and published in 1933, Freud writes:

War runs most emphatically counter to the psychic disposition imposed on us by the growth of culture; we are therefore bound to resent war, to find it utterly intolerable. With pacifists like us it is not merely an intellectual and affective repulsion, but a constitutional intolerance, an idiosyncrasy in its most drastic form.

Even when talking about psychological development Freud notes that "two of the most important phenomena of culture are, firstly, a strengthening of the intellect, which tends to master our instinctive life, and, secondly, an introversion of the

aggressive impulse". In other words, as the human subject develops, it moves further and further away from an impulse to war. For Freud, to reach a state of global social balance and world peace, man must take control over his instincts as the remnants of his animal nature. To realize humanity, then, would be to eliminate war.

Reflecting on Einstein's question to him as to how long it might be before the rest of humanity became pacifists, Freud responded that it was impossible to say but concluded that "... we can be sure that everything that contributes to cultural development also works against war." The assumption, for both Freud and Einstein, was that the more human life progresses, the less inclined to war it would be. But, can we be so sure about this today?

On closer inspection, it is not the pacifist rationalist justification that makes us feel uncomfortable with the now omnipresent master signifier of the inhumane war. Indeed, this justification, rather than being unsettling, alleviates our discomfort. It leans on two powerful phantasmal components, namely the notion that it is possible to overcome the animality in us and that in the future we will all live in peace. In short, *rationalist humanist pacifism* plays the function of obfuscating and disguising a painful and unbearable truth.

The perversity of calling a war 'inhumane' is emphatically not the fact that the idea of the 'inhumane war' is obviously misguided as it is premised on the false presupposition that there *is* such thing as a humane war. It is the exact opposite; the conceit that a war can be anything else but *humane*. This is the painful and unbearable truth one represses by calling a war 'inhumane'. War is not the act of the animal or beast; it is a particularly human construction.

## **Animals and War**

Animals do not lead wars. Humans do. Animals are engaged in wars as human companions and as a part of the war machine. These included the traditional military animals, such as dogs, horses, camels, elephants, and pigeons, which have been used for transportation, as cavalry mounts, or in espionage throughout human history. There are also those employed in specialized military functions, for example, as living bombs. One of the earliest reports on this practice comes from the Southern Song Dynasty of China (960-1279 CE), where monkeys were covered with straw, dipped in oil, and set on fire. They were then set loose into the enemy's camp with the aim of causing panic and pandemonium. There are other examples such as dogs laden with explosives used by Soviets against German tanks during the Second World War. The United States too made use of animals during the conflagration, with its bat bombs and Project Pigeon.

More recently, animal-borne explosives have been used by insurgents in the Middle East. At times, such living weapons have been left wandering alone and, at others, they are ridden by suicide bombers. In the twenty-first century, sea lions, seals, and dolphins are in active use for bomb detection and for guarding ships against enemy divers. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Soviet military's dolphin program was passed on to the Ukrainian Navy. After the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Ukrainian dolphin program was taken over by Russia. Conflicting statements have been made regarding the fate of the 'battle dolphins'. One claim is that the program was decommissioned prior to the annexation, with all military dolphins either having been sold or having died of natural causes. A counterclaim suggests that dolphins died patriotically after going on hunger strikes and resisting their Russian captors.

In war, animals either become warriors in human combats or turn into refugees, animals escaping their human captors to return to the wild or going on the run with their human masters. Given this reality, is it not the greatest of falsifications for humans to claim that it is his animalistic aspect that is the true culprit of war? It raises an interesting question: is killing the animal in us - in some sort of a rationalist pacifist exorcism - really a path towards freedom?

## **War is Human**

While destructive instincts and aggressive impulses are part of both animal and human life, war and warfare are particularly social processes. War is not just about a capacity to kill, but a propensity to take up arms, tilting us toward collective violence. People fight and kill for personal reasons, but homicide is not war. War is a social phenomenon involving groups organizing to kill people from other groups.

According to the multi-year research of anthropologists, as reported by anthropologist R. Bryan Ferguson in the article *War is no part of human nature*, "the preconditions that make war more likely include a shift to a more sedentary existence, a growing regional population, a concentration of valuable resources such as livestock, increasing social complexity and hierarchy, trade in high-value goods, and the establishment of group boundaries and collective identities". These conditions, claims Ferguson, are sometimes combined with severe environmental changes. He also notes that, once established, war has a tendency to spread, with violent peoples replacing less violent ones.

Delving deeper into the question of the human propensity to war often involves looking beyond our species to examine the experiences of our chimpanzee relatives. Following extensive research, Ferguson concluded that chimps, as a species, are not 'killer apes': "War is fostered by culturally specific systems of knowledge and values that generate powerful meanings of 'us versus them.'" These social constructs, he

claims, have no primate analogies. Moreover, from comparative case studies, he concluded that 'war' among chimpanzees is not an evolved evolutionary strategy but an induced response to human disturbance.

In this sense, war is not the expression of an uncontrolled animality in us, but rather a radical disclosure of humanity as it is. The more devastating the war, the more humane it is.

### **The Absurdities of Discourse**

The falsification created by the humanist pacifist disposition produces absurdities such as this one: the more war is called inhumane - that is, animalistic - the more we try to humanize animals in war. Immediately after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, European animal protection organizations mobilized to supply Ukrainian animal shelters with food and medicines, evacuate Zoos, and resolve the legal issues on the borders so that people escaping conflict could take their pets with them. The media was full of stories of the loving relationship between humans and animals, highlighting the consolation and courage pets bring people in these times of war

In the same way as organizations for the protection of animal rights - that is, human rights imposed on animals - organizations for the protection of refugees act in the name of 'humanitarianism'. In short, both refugees and domesticated animals are taken as *victims* of the war in Ukraine.

The division between domesticated animals, including animals trained for war, and animals designated for elimination, insects, ticks, viruses, and wild beasts, matches the division between 'our' migrants and 'foreign migrants'.

For instance, in Slovenia, a week after the outbreak of the war, a local newspaper reported on the same page two stories that counterposed each other in the most striking of manners. The first covered the arrival of Ukrainian refugees. It was reported that they are welcomed and taken care of by the government and the article ends with a call to Slovenian citizens to help Ukrainian families. The second piece reported on an accident on the highway involving a van carrying 'migrants'. The driver fled the scene of the accident, leaving several people dead. At the *same time* and *in the same place* we accept Ukrainian refugees and ignore the fact that Slovenia has a barbed wire along its border with Croatia and that people coming from the Middle East are dying on a daily basis when trying to climb the wire and swim over the River Kolpa. The distinction between good and bad migrants was made clear by Prime Minister Janša who stated that refugees from Ukraine were "completely different regarding the level of culture..." Why? Because Ukrainians are Europeans, they are on the right side of humanism and Enlightenment, they are 'us' and not 'them'.



## The Dangers of Discourse

Inhumanity is part of human nature. There is something uncontrollable, wild, and brutal that determines us from within. But instead of adopting this strangeness in us as our inherent part, we tend to repress it. Comforting ourselves with the idea that the true source of inhumanity is somewhere else, we constantly project it outwards. We consider inhumanity to be something external to the human, something that is merely attached to us from the outside and that we can get rid of through the progress of culture. The fact that we call this inhumanity 'animality' is merely a symptom of this externalization: it is not *us* but the *animal* in us, which is 'vile, cruel and inhuman'.

Yet, throughout the history of humanism, there are two main orders of objects delegated to the external place of 'animality': the first is animals, in general, and the second is people corresponding to the taboo figure of a *barbarian*, seen as uncivilized, half-animal, and half-human.

In our humanist minds, these two orders of objects merge in a series of prejudices and phantasmal equations. As the bearers of externalized inhumanity, both animals and 'barbarians' are represented in public discourse in two opposing ways: either we consider them victims or enemies. As externalized inhumanity, however, these two representations are but two faces of the same thing: one cannot pull them apart because this double role determines their very status in discourse. This is clearly visible in the discourse on migrants, which has spread in the West since the Syrian civil war and is, with the recent outbreak of the war in Ukraine, acquiring new contours.

It is not hard to predict in which direction the discourse on migrants will develop. Surely, the polarization of victim-enemy perspective on migrants will gain new features. On the one hand, there will be a growing split between openly considering the Ukrainian refugees as victims and the Middle Eastern refugees as enemies, revealing the hypocrisy of the previous humanist perspective on the Middle Eastern refugees, where the idea of the victim was only disguising the repressed view on them as enemies.

This polarization will not represent an outburst of racism out of nowhere - it will only mark a quantitative, not a qualitative change - for racism is inscribed in the humanist project itself. There is no humanist project without repressed otherness and externalized animality.

However - and this is a new danger - as soon as we will start to consider Ukrainian refugees as victims - and massive victimization is already going on in the media and the social media - we will externalize them, building a barrier between 'us' and

'them'. This might seem an obvious point, but a necessary consequence of such an externalization is that the repressed inner otherness is easily projected on this object. As soon as they are marked as victims, they will be also considered enemies, although nobody will dare to say it. Then, when somebody does 'dare' to say what is already inscribed, it will be likely used to gain traction for nationalism. If the discourse on the victims will grow, Ukrainians, who are now on the side of the *human*, might invisibly slip to the side of an animal, following the path of their Middle Eastern predecessors.

## References

R. Bryan Ferguson, 'War is Not Part of Human Nature', in *Scientific American*, available at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/war-is-not-part-of-human-nature/>

## **The Western Media at War**

### **Stefan Bertram-Lee**

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine - and, in fact, for months beforehand - the Western media were clear about which side they were on. They wanted Ukraine to win, and especially for Russia to lose. But just because the media is fighting a war, that doesn't mean they're any good at it. The United States has recently quintupled Ukraine's military budget and this might be a factor in the outcome of the war, but it has little to do with the media.

The war has been glued to the top news sources around the world, but the attention paid to it by the news media and by the public has not been congruent. According to google search indexing, public interest in the US and the UK peaked on February 24th, the day of the invasion, and has declined ever since. If the purpose of this media campaign is to ensure that the war holds the continual interest of the Anglo-American public, then they have failed.

### **Russia 'Bad'**

Of course, much has changed in public discourse in the last couple of months. The name 'Russia' has been entirely blackened in the minds of more or less everyone, but it was a name already near a midnight shade in the west. They have delivered the specter of death and war to the West in a way that they haven't felt since the 1992 Soviet counterrevolution, and, because the war is fought on Ukrainian territory, there are going to be many thousands of Ukrainian civilian deaths, and approximately zero Russian ones (Though of course civilians continue to be killed in pro-Russian separatist territories). Given the years of Russia coverage behind us, all the media had to do was present some events as they were in order to manufacture consent for their position.

The decline in interest has been steady. Days of focus on the Bucha Massacre and talk of genocide made no discernible impact on search indexes. This is one problem that arises when a group is painted as unambiguously evil from the start: any crime they subsequently commit comes as no surprise.

On April 11th, the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion claimed that Russians had dropped a chemical agent on them. The Western media credulously took this up and it led the headlines for a day or so. Yet, while our leaders and our mainstream media said that such a thing could never be tolerated, there was such no grand reaction from the public. Perhaps it is the case that since Russia has already been accused of every crime under the sun, including genocide, an accusation of a chemical attack doesn't elicit much of a reaction. Of course, this wasn't a real chemical attack, nor a

particularly impressive or well-done fake accusation - rather a desperate jab by an encircled military unit with a Twitter account - but the reaction certainly gives us some data to think about.

## **A Failed Message**

On the other hand, perhaps the media is primarily focused on influencing the elites rather than the public. In that case, a constant focus on atrocities seems misplaced. Containing Russia is a policy aim for nearly every major political group in the west, so creating the perception that policymakers are plausibly going to be able to meet their policy aims would surely be more effective than telling a sob story.

The Ukrainian government's approach here seems to be a strategic one. Reports of atrocities are immediately followed by a pivot into a demand for weapons, but the Western media can't seem to take their eyes from the bodies. Ukraine won a major victory at the start of April. The Russians were forced to withdraw from the North in the face of dogged Ukrainian resistance, but the media only managed to speak about this victory for half a day before the revelation of large-scale civilian deaths in towns under Russian control directed their eyes back down to the bodies. Ironically these civilian deaths, in Bucha and elsewhere, and their mass display to Western elites and the public actually served to conceal Russia's most embarrassing defeat of the war, and ultimately meant that the ideal time to launch a massive media campaign to arm the Ukrainians was missed.

The only real pressure for practical military help for Ukraine in Western media has been a pestering of Biden's press secretary with the demand that the President end the world. A No-Fly Zone was never going to be an option for anyone with actual power in the West, and thank God for that, though there was enough bleating about the topic for Keir Starmer to say that he'd talk to Bojo about it.

Western coverage has sometimes seemed like "baby's first war". One day the BBC led with the headline 'Russian tanks on the streets of Mariupol', as if weeks into the war, in a major offensive zone, it was at all notable to report that there would be Russian tanks in the area. The Western coverage of Mariupol has been one of the strangest parts of the war. We might expect that the siege would be narrated constantly as a heroic battle against the odds by a surrounded force fighting a dogged defense. Instead, Mariupol seems only to come up in the western press when there is, or there is alleged to be, a major strike on civilians. The Western press seemed unable to overcome their humanitarian impulse, and report on what would be a perfect tool for creating a narrative of heroic defenders to push the west towards the military supply of Ukraine, as was desired by the Ukrainian Government.

As Ukrainian forces were pushed out of Mariupol city and into Azovstal, the media occasionally seemed like it would start to tell a war story, but the focus always

flicked back to the civilians, something which became more and more absurd as the number of civilians living under Ukrainian control dwindled and dwindled. This absurdity has culminated now that Ukrainian forces only control the Azovstal Steel Plant, one of the wonders of Soviet Engineering, and certainly not a residential zone. There are likely still a few thousand Ukrainian fighters in Azovstal, and the media was even given a timeline reprieve by Putin himself on national television, as he personally ordered Russian forces not to storm the plant and instead to starve it out.

But this gift from the big man himself was not accepted and, instead, the focus has remained on the small number of civilians trapped in Azovstal. Even when civilians are literally outnumbered by soldiers the western media refuses to take the camera off them and refuses to tell a war story. Perhaps the fighters there should make sure the civilians leave the area and see if the western media would be finally willing to focus on them, but the likely reality would be that the many wounded and ill soldiers in the area would instead be recast as civilians or something like civilians, and the script would be run from the top again.

### **Why can't the Western media tell a war story?**

Perhaps the reluctance in this specific case is due to the fact that Mariupol is prominently defended by the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion alongside regular Ukrainian marines. This seems unlikely, though, as there has been a widescale operation in western media to launder the reputation of Azov and create the conception of Azov as nothing other than a group of patriots (while another line of media effort does their best to make it out that Azov only has, perhaps, a dozen members). These efforts have often been faltering. *The Times* ran a piece titled 'Azov Battalion: "We are patriots – we're fighting the real Nazis of the 21st century"', and led the piece with a title image showing Azov fighters at a funeral for one of their members. The only person in the image who isn't wearing a military uniform is wearing an M818th shirt, a Russian National Socialist Black Metal band who moved to Ukraine in 2014 after the Maidan Revolution, the two 8s of course standing for HH, Heil Hitler. Of course, anyone with knowledge of these signs and signifiers would know the implications and the effort to convince us that Azov were not Nazis would probably not lead with an image of them proudly wearing a Nazi symbol.

This kind of misfiring is going on both sides. Both Westerners and Ukrainians seem to think that Ukraine, if only perhaps very recently, is part of the west, but there are different ideas of what this means. Ukrainians will publish - in English - posts calling Russians Orcs, their official institute for 'national remembering' will post, again in English, claims that the Ukrainian nation should be taken seriously because Ukrainians are of separate genetic origins to Russians and various other things good Europeans are no longer meant to say. While Russian massacres must be revealed by

others, Ukrainian executions, and torture of Russian prisoners of war are released for local patriotic consumption by the Ukrainian forces themselves, but of course flow out of these places and into the western internet, evoking horror, and very commonly, denial.

This idea, that the Ukrainians are proper Westerners, is one idea I have for why the West seems incapable of telling a good old-fashioned war story in Ukraine. Part of my confusion is because I have seen the western media tell a good old-fashioned war story. They gave a blow-by-blow rapt account of the siege of Kobane by ISIS, and it seemed that the grand attention paid to those events was a major part in pushing US intervention in that fight. But of course, Syrians, Kurds; well, they aren't Westerners, and, of course, wars are somehow 'natural' to the middle east, so what else would we expect?

Of course, in that case, the Western media was ready to tell us a good old war story. What other kind of event could come out of such a calamitous region? Conversely, Ukraine, at least since February 24th, is part of the West, and wars don't happen in the west: foreign tanks don't roll through the streets, cities aren't besieged, soldiers don't fight until their last bullet, and so on and so on. That perhaps is why the news story of Ukraine is told as if it was a terrorist attack, a flood, or a pandemic. They can't tell us a good old war story, because good old-fashioned war stories just don't happen in the West anymore.

## Ukraine and the Spectre of Christopher Hitchens

### Ben Burgis

The United States and Russia are closer to the brink of World War III than they've been at any time since *at least* the Cuban Missile Crisis. Even in 1962 the CIA wasn't assassinating Russian generals and bragging about it to *The New York Times*.

You would think that the Left, such as it is, would be squarely on the side of de-escalation and peace negotiations—and to a great extent, you'd be right. Magazines like *Jacobin* and *Current Affairs* have been running non-stop articles along those lines. Noam Chomsky is doing what Noam Chomsky does and the Democratic Socialists of America are very much on the same page. All of the above have taken a fair amount of heat as a result. DSA was denounced by the White House Rapid Response Team, for example, and Chomsky was dragged all over Twitter as a "Putin apologist." Given the realities of a largely unorganized working class and major defeats for even those moderate social democratic politicians who are (often ambiguously) aligned with us the serious Left has depressingly little institutional power. But if the ruling classes of Russia and the United States are going to play Nuclear Roulette, I'm glad I'm part of a movement that's at least *trying* to stand up for basic sanity.

Conversely, it's been disturbing to see good progressives who I would normally think of as at least soft political allies singing a very different tune. I just wrote a book about Christopher Hitchens, and as I watch anti-war leftists get accused of supporting "appeasement" because they want Biden and Putin to step back from the brink, it's hard not to hear a jarring echo of the posh and boozy tones of War on Terror-era Hitchens as he absurdly accused the Chomskyite dissidents of that era of being "pro-Saddam."

### Hitchens and the Left

The "Hitch" was in many ways a brilliant writer, speaker, and debater—that last item being of particular interest to me. The first name with his book on the cover, a collection of Marx and Engels's writings on the Paris Commune edited and introduced by Hitchens, came out in 1971. He was in the middle of writing the last of the very personal essays about his experience with oesophageal cancer that were later anthologized in a book called *Mortality* when he died from complications of that cancer in 2011.

During the first forty years of that career, he produced, just to start with his 1990s "greatest hits," wonderful books attacking Bill Clinton, Henry Kissinger and Mother Teresa. (If you're wondering what Mother Teresa is doing with those other two, all I

can say is *read the book*—Hitch has the Ghoul of Calcutta dead to rights on subjects ranging from her close relationship with the Duvalier regime in Haiti to her refusal to use the money pouring in from donations all around the world to buy proper anesthetics for the sick and dying people under her care. Suffering, she believed, brought them closer to God.) Hitchens’s pamphlet attacking the British monarchy is golden and, given that the Brits have inexplicably not succeeded in abolishing that institution three decades later, evergreen. So is a whole lot of what he wrote during his decades as a columnist at *The Nation*. One of my goals in writing about Hitchens was to introduce this body of work to contemporary left-wing readers too young to remember *that* Hitchens. If they remember him at all, what they remember is what he became after September 11th, 2001.

I also want to provide a more plausible diagnosis of how Early Hitchens became Late Hitchens than anything I’d read from other left-wing sources. A big part of the reason I continue to find the guy so fascinating has to do with a combination of deep admiration for some parts of his work and deep revulsion with others. One of my chapter titles is, “What the Hell Happened?”

Standard explanations by his disgusted ex-comrades felt unsatisfying to me. At least one big-name leftie who overlapped with Hitch’s time working at *The Nation* told me “the booze just ate his brain.” Others speculate that “Islamophobia” possibly stemming from Hitchens’s intense atheism had something to do with it. And since the specific kind of Marxist that Hitch had been in the 70s was a Trotskyist, I’ve heard a lot about the alleged “trot to neocon pipeline.” But from where I’m sitting none of that adds up. The “Islamophobia” explanation, for example, just doesn’t fit the timeline. It’s true enough that whatever was left of Hitchens’s anti-imperialism pretty much went away after 9/11. It’s also true that he overestimated the level of threat that Al Qaeda-style terrorism could realistically pose to western societies to a pretty absurd extent. That wasn’t exactly an unusual problem to have in the post-9/11 years, but if you want to call it Islamophobia, I certainly won’t fight you on that point.

Even so, far from being some sudden dramatic transformation, the substance of Hitchens’s foreign policy views had been evolving for almost a decade before the planes hit the towers. The first war that made him warm up to the idea that the American military could be a force for good in the world wasn’t one where the United States was bombing Muslims. It was Bosnia, where the US was intervening on behalf of Muslims against ethnic-cleansing Serbian Orthodox Christians. And his eagerness to see Saddam Hussein out of power had a lot to do with his time in the Kurdish enclave in Northern Iraq—a group whose leaders were, no less than the Ba’athists they opposed, largely secular Muslims. As my friend Djene Bajalan points out, many of the Kurdish leaders were former 1970s radicals themselves, and they could speak to Hitch in his own language. That’s a hugely important part of



Hitchens's evolution. In the final years of his life, he wore a Kurdish flag pin everywhere he went.

I'm about as skeptical about the "pipeline" which Stalinists believe connects Trotskyism to later coming to hold foreign policy views that can be at least vaguely described as neoconservative. The vast majority of ex-Trotskyists whose politics change later in life, like the vast majority of Stalinists who lose their earlier radicalism, just become liberals. In the specific case of Christopher Hitchens, he continued to consider himself to be some sort of moderate socialist throughout the 70s, 80s, and 90s but there were almost *thirty years* between Hitch's youthful membership in a small Trotskyist organization and his coming to agree with the neocons about Iraq. That's one hell of a "pipeline."

...and no, I don't think bottles of Hitch's beloved Johnny Walker Black need to come with labels warning EXCESSIVE CONSUMPTION MAY LEAD TO MORE AGGRESSIVE AND MILITARISTIC FOREIGN POLICY POSITIONS. If you haven't met any leftists older than Hitchens was when he died who like their booze as much as he did, you probably haven't met very many old leftists.

What all these explanations have in common is that they're ways for the anti-war left to tell ourselves comforting stories about our own comparative virtue. If Hitchens's wrong turn can be blamed on anti-Muslim bigotry or boozing or some mysterious Trotsky-derived mind virus, rather than a sincere attempt to apply his values to a messy world, we don't have to worry that we (the good people!) could make similarly disastrous mistakes.

But it seems to me that more than a few good-hearted progressives are making a *strikingly* similar mistake regarding the war in Ukraine—a situation where the potential consequences of hawkish policy choices could make the damage brought about by the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions look trivial. Congress just voted Ukraine another \$40 billion of aid—nearly seven times that country's total military budget for 2021. Seth Moulton of the House Armed Services Committee casually told a Fox News interviewer, "We're not just at war to support the Ukrainians. We're fundamentally at war, although somewhat through a proxy, with Russia, and it's important that we win." Without using the p-word, Biden's Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has suggested that the goal is not simply to evict Russia from Ukraine but to "weaken Russia to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things it has done in invading Ukraine." Considering that American intelligence sources have been bragging to the *New York Times* about assassinating Russian generals and sinking Russian ships, the prospect of even further escalation as the conflict drags on should make your blood run cold. Maybe it can keep going for years without anything disastrous happening between the superpowers but the plain fact is that right at the moment Washington and Moscow are playing a game that puts the entire world in

danger.

Bernie Sanders's foreign policy advisor Matt Duss normally takes positions vastly better than those of the Washington, D.C. foreign policy "blob". But since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he's publicly equated calls for the United States to push peace talks with advocacy that "Ukraine surrenders." More recently, he took a very Hitchensian potshot at leftists whose "anti-imperialism" leads them to "nod along with Henry Kissinger." I'd never deny that Kissinger is a monster who's been involved in war crimes and crimes against humanity from Chile to Cambodia. But surely from any anti-imperialist perspective, Kissinger's realist willingness to pursue détente and de-escalation with Russia has always been the *least* bad thing about him. Or take Know Your Enemy—a left-wing podcast that I normally quite like. I'm a patron. But in an episode about a month after the invasion, the hosts casually accused the politically diverse signatories of [an open letter](#) (which called for "people of goodwill everywhere to join us in saying No to the illogic of escalation") of secretly "want[ing] Putin to win." After all, they reasoned, Biden hasn't sent American troops or set up a No-Fly Zone, so what possible grounds could anyone have for concern about a march toward ever more direct conflict with Russia? To be fair to the Know Your Enemy guys, that episode happened before most of the developments recited above. But at this point, *everyone* should be concerned about escalation.

There's a *reason* that neither Soviet military support for Vietnamese revolutionaries fighting the United States in the 1970s nor American military support for the mujahadeen fighting the Soviet Union in the 1980s ever reached anything like this level. Post-Soviet Russia was perhaps too much of a mess in the 1990s for Yeltsin to be able to do much to support Russia's close ally Serbia when the United States was bombing the shit out of Belgrade but even given vastly more favorable conditions he may have hesitated for the same reason both Khrushchev and Kennedy hesitated about further escalation in 1962.

World wars tend to start with regional wars involving smaller countries menaced by great powers (see Serbia 1914, Poland 1939). They become *world* wars when a second great power steps into the fray. The difference between the first two of those and a possible new one fought between Russia and the United States is, as John F. Kennedy put it during the Cuban Missile Crisis, "victory" in *this* war would be "ashes in our mouths."

### **Their "Internationalism" and Ours**

When my Hitchens book came out, I wasn't surprised that some leftists didn't like the fact that I have such a relatively sympathetic view of a famous turncoat. What did surprise me a little (though in retrospect it shouldn't have) was that there are

still so many unreconstructed Late Hitchens fanboys walking around who basically think he got everything right until the day he died. Some reviewers complained that I just *took it as a given* that Hitchens' support for America's post 9/11 wars in the Middle East was catastrophically misguided. My usual line about this is that if you need to be persuaded on that point in the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand and Twenty-Two, I can't help you.

A more substantive answer, though, would connect at least a very strong default anti-war position on any American intervention around the world with more basic socialist premises. In a recent article in *Jacobin*, I took a shot at doing exactly that, starting with a capsule history of the First, Second, and Third Internationals and then explaining *why* socialists traditionally took this position:

At its core, socialism is about empowering the working class — and not just the part of it that lives in the United States. Wars are one of the most extreme ways imaginable that ordinary people can be disempowered. Politicians declare the wars, their capitalist friends make a killing manufacturing the guns and bombs, and working-class people on both sides are literally killed.

Vladimir Putin and his oligarch friends, for example, are in no more physical danger than Dick Cheney and his friends at Halliburton were during the war in Iraq. It's working-class Russian soldiers and Ukrainian civilians who are doing the dying now — and who will continue to die in even greater numbers if people like Hillary Clinton get their openly expressed wish and Ukraine becomes an Afghanistan-style quagmire for Putin.

...Even in a global thermonuclear conflict, if there are any escapes to be had, either to mineshafts (a la Dr Strangelove) or spaceships (a la Don't Look Up), they'll only be available to the wealthiest and best connected. As with all previous wars, the rest of us would be fucked.

To address the standard counter-example to the generalization "socialists should be anti-war," it's certainly plausible that the very real risk of global fascism justified American leftists relaxing their anti-war stance between 1939 and 1945—even that meant rooting for the victory of a racial apartheid state (the 1940s United States), Stalin's Russia, and the British Empire. The stakes were that high. But that's compatible with seeing an anti-war stance as an incredibly strong default and thinking it should take a lot more to override it than simply (correctly) pointing out that Saddam Hussein or Vladimir Putin or whoever the next enemy might be are (like Hitler!) evil tyrants who do evil things (gassing the Kurds, invading Ukraine). Late Hitchens, of course, was fond of World War II metaphors, which isn't surprising. As his conservative brother Peter Hitchens once told me, given what Britain was like when they were growing up, the real religion they were raised in

wasn't so much Christianity as "we won the war." Plenty of aging bohemian secularists end up returning to their childhood religion. Hitch's hero George Orwell had argued during World War II that "pacifism is objectively pro-fascist." This leads to a lot of interesting questions like, "Was Bertrand Russell objectively pro-Kaiser?" You can forgive Orwell for losing his head in the white heat of anti-fascist passion, and to his credit, he recanted this formulation in 1944, writing:

To admit that an opponent might be both honest and intelligent is felt to be intolerable. It is more immediately satisfying to shout that he is a fool or a scoundrel, or both, than to find out what he is really like.

If Orwell could recognize *during World War II* that many pacifists actually had honorable intentions and that he should engage with their arguments rather than dismissing them as supporters of the enemy, it doesn't seem like too much to ask that pro-war progressives should make the same concession during wars where the case for overriding the anti-war default position is unfathomably weaker. In the sober light of hindsight I don't think anyone really thinks that, if the Gulf War hadn't happened, Saddam's invasion of Kuwait would have been the first step of a grandiose Hitlerian plan of world conquest that would end with the Iraqi National Guard marching through Paris. And it's not much more plausible to think the Russian attack on Ukraine is the first step of such a plan. Russia's size and nuclear arsenal makes it a significant player but it also has an economy the size of Italy. In what currently looks like the unlikely event of Russia marching on Kyiv and replacing Zelensky with a puppet ruler, Hillary Clinton would get her wish and Ukraine would become Russia's Afghanistan. Note by the way that George W. Bush, bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, never even got around to attacking *either* of two members other of the "Axis of Evil" — not even the one right smack in between Iraq and Afghanistan. Of course, Russia getting away with cluster-bombing, invading and occupying a sovereign country is outrageous--albeit, not to put too fine a point on it, not exactly unprecedented. The question is whether it follows from the outrageousness of what Russia is doing that another major power becoming ever more directly involved in the war is a good thing. Should anti-imperialists have been rooting for Russia or China to do the equivalent when the United States invaded Iraq? It's one thing to argue that citizens of a conquered nation have a right to fight to defend their country and quite another to support a second power wading in and making everything a thousand times more dangerous.

World War II analogies are cheap as dirt. I'm old enough to remember when *Manuel Noriega* spent five minutes being "Hitler" in the American media (followed by Saddam, followed by Slobodan Milosevic, followed by Saddam again, in a mind-numbing progression of Hitlers that now includes the gangster-ish but not really very Hitler-like Vladimir Putin). Hell, World War II analogies are invoked by supporters of *both* sides of the current conflict—hence Putin's nonsense about

“denazification.” The more sophisticated move made by pro-war leftists is to bring up the Spanish Civil War and to use the word “internationalist” a lot. But there are a good number of relevant differences between Americans and Brits volunteering for socialist militias in Republican Spain and Americans and Brits calling for one imperial power to become increasingly directly involved in a conflict with another whose potential stakes include a small but real chance of universal annihilation. And as I argued in that piece in *Jacobin*, what “internationalism” always meant in the socialist tradition is exactly the opposite of liberal interventionism

There really are a handful of deeply unpleasant weirdos on the western left who are just about dumb enough to take “denazification” seriously and who somehow seem to have convinced themselves that Vladimir Putin (in the real world the leader of a deeply reactionary imperial power propped up by wealthy oligarchs and the Russian Orthodox Church) is the reincarnation of Vladimir Lenin. But 999 out of every 1000 leftists who are accused of being “Putin apologists” are no friendlier to Putin’s regime than, say, Rosa Luxemburg was to the regime of Tsar Nicholas. They support Russia’s anti-war movement just as Luxemburg saw the anti-war Bolsheviks as her comrades.

Some of her fellow German socialists who voted war credits to the Kaiser in the Reichstag sounded a whole lot like Late Hitchens as they talked about how triumphant German soldiers would be throwing open the doors to the Tsar’s prisons. Genuine internationalists like Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht disagreed not because they didn’t care about bringing freedom to Russia but because they thought that was the task of the Russian working class.

### **The Road to Late Hitchensism**

To understand why Hitchens became Late Hitchens, it’s important to understand two threads in his evolution. First, the enemies the United States was facing in the 90s and 2000s were far less sympathetic than the ones it had faced in earlier conflicts. I don’t believe for a second that, if George W. Bush had been waging war against left-wing peasant revolutionaries as LBJ had in Vietnam or Reagan had in Nicaragua, Hitchens ever could have brought himself to support *that*. But when he looked at enemies like Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein, he saw them as equivalent not to the forces the United States had been *fighting* in the 70s and 80s but to the forces the United States had been *propping up*—like the death squads in Central America. Second, in the “End of History” atmosphere of the 90s, Hitchens lost his confidence that a renewed international socialist movement would ever come into being and he reasoned that, if the workers of the world were not going to topple petty despotisms around the world, the 82nd Airborne might be up to the job. The road to Late Hitchensism, in other words, is paved with good intentions. Just as it makes sense that Early Hitchens was becoming Late Hitchens at a time of deep

defeats for the global left, I suspect that it's not a coincidence that this new embrace of liberal militarism by much of the soft left is happening a couple of years after deep defeats for both American and British social democracy. And Vladimir Putin, who really is engaged in a disgusting war of imperial aggression, is the kind of villain it makes sense for people with left-wing values to get worked up about opposing.

Seeing genuinely horrifying things happen in the world and feeling powerless to stop them can be awful, and the desire to "do something" runs deep. But if we've learned anything from the last several decades of American foreign policy, when "something" means military adventurism, "doing nothing" is often vastly preferable.

Nor should we accept the idea that racing toward the precipice of World War III is the only thing that "something" can mean. Welcoming every Ukrainian refugee who wants to come is an excellent "something" for example. So is increasing *humanitarian* assistance to Ukraine. At the moment, in terms of saving a huge number of Ukrainian lives in the short term and saving the planet from something much worse if things continue to escalate, the most important "something" the United States could do would be to directly participate in peace negotiations to bring the horror to the fastest possible conclusion.

Of course, progressive Ukraine hawks will tell you that doing so would be terrible high-handed interference in Ukrainian prerogatives. Somehow, in these people's minds, flooding the war zone with weapons to make sure the right side wins, assassinating the other side's generals and the rest isn't an unacceptable level of interference in other people's conflicts—but promoting peace talks crosses the line. At that point in the argument, those leftists who've held on to their anti-war principles can simply roll their eyes and move on.

The fact is that escalating tensions between Russia and the United States put *everyone* in danger—a point best summarized by something that Early Hitchens wrote in 1983, as he looked back on the Cuban Missile Crisis twenty years earlier: "Like every one else of my generation, I can remember exactly where I was standing and what I was doing on the day that President John Fitzgerald Kennedy nearly killed me."

## Against the “Decolonize World War Three” Movement

### Arturo Desimone

Under what has become a classic New York Times [headline](#) "Goodbye, Tchaikovsky and Tolstoy: Ukrainians look to ‘decolonize’ their Streets", an American correspondent likens a Lviv street named after Russian composer Piotr Tchaikovsky to US Confederate Civil War monuments—which Southern State municipalities erected in the 1950s to undermine the civil rights struggle.

The crazed headline ironically celebrates the “decolonial” effacement of Tolstoy, the aristocratic anarchist whose long, drawn out correspondence with Mohandas Gandhi impacted the ideas of that most famous of all anti-colonial activists. After that, it would be foolish to expect any mention of the history of territorial tensions between Poland and Ukraine over former Lvov—the border-city once brutally expropriated from Poland. The Tolstoy-amputating journalist reads like a character escaped from the set of a rewritten, “woke” version of Mark Twain’s mock-travelogue “The Innocents Abroad”—about American exceptionalism.

In a similar “decolonial” vein, Foreign Policy magazine—which is a specialists’ drawing-board for the security think tank industry—ran “From Pushkin to Putin: Russian Literature’s Imperial Ideology” by Volodymyr Yermolenko, one of the Ukrainian literary scholars regularly featured in Foreign Policy. Yermolenko deploys postcolonial literary theory to unmask the alleged colonial patriarchal supremacy haunting Dostoyevsky, Lermontov and Mayakovski.

It is true that Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s anti-Western nationalism found a humourless imitator in Alexander Solzhenitsyn, whose ideas about a vindicated future “Holy Russia” influenced Putin’s belief-system. But it is also true that American Cold War liberals who today promote Yermolenko, yesterday promoted Solzhenitsyn while downplaying and fluffing over his reactionary politics—even as the Russian Orthodox mystic railed against Western decadence while being luxuriously hosted as an exile in Vermont, and while accepting the Nobel prize. Solzhenitsyn’s Western supporters bear at least as much blame as poor long-dead Dostoyevsky for the spread of contemporary Christian nationalism infesting much of eastern Europe.

Yermolenko, interestingly, speaks of the 19th century Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko—himself a former slave—who penned “Kavkaz”, a homage to the Caucasus’ natives’ insurgency against Tsarist imperialism, and who even vindicates an indigenous woman gang-raped by occupying Russian soldiers. Shevchenko’s visionary solidarity with Asians runs contrary to the history peddled by university departments of literature, by showing how an oppressed white European thinker was capable of self-identification with non-Europeans. Alas, even in the case of that founding bard of Ukrainian identity, such color-blind empathy had its limits—as we

see in the new translation of Shevshenko's epic "Caucasus" in the otherwise politically-correct LitHub,[1]:

Come learn from us!... Our way is (to) gouge, (...) Here in our land! What can't we do? We count the stars, sow buckwheat seeds, We curse the French. Get good receipts For selling serfs, or else we lose Them playing cards... not Negroes, hmmm, But you know... Christians, only... dumb. We aren't Spaniards; God forbid That we should deal in stolen goods. We heed the law! Not like those Yids... By the laws of the apostles You should love your brother! Hypocrites and idle gossips, Damned by God our Father.

Will EU capitals soon raise Shevshenko to his stars of burnt buckwheat by engraving these verses onto slick government edifices? The poem proves incompatible with the "woke" language championed by the Ukrainian academics. Reading literature requires context— here, Shevchenko narrates the perspective of Russian conquerors lording over Central Asian and Ukrainian captives, as they weigh and compare the latter's usefulness as servants to other subaltern peoples in the world. This is not unlike how today's European establishment makes no secret of its preferring Ukrainian refugees and the Ukrainian cause over war-victims from Syria, Yemen, or Afghanistan, despite that all of them are up for exploitation one way or another.

We might ask how Shevshenko compares to the internationalist poetry by anti-colonial Haitian revolutionary Jacques Roumain, who in his verse "Sales Nègres" asks the colonized workers of the world not to obey:

When they shall give us the order,  
to machine-gun our Arab brothers  
in Syria  
in Tunisia  
in Morocco  
and our white comrades, the striking labourers  
to stifle those in the Louisiana cotton-plantations

Perhaps these two poets are not worlds apart. But their bohemian internationalisms differ greatly from Ukrainian and other Slavic nationalisms, which traditionally cast their peoples as martyr-guardians who defend the Christian West against invading hordes from Asia. The woke mask came off in a recent uproar when Yermolenko wrote in a tweet he later deleted under pressure from his angered twitter followers: "Russia is turning into an Asian state, and is refinding its true origins in Golden Horde, as Russian Eurasians always said. In this century its key dilemma will be to align with China or to be swallowed by China. Ukraine's struggle extends Europe's borders to the East".



In "Freedom and Freedonia", [2] late historian Tony Judt summed up the ideological mindset of entitlement that underlies Yermolenko's botched PR-talk of "the Asiatic horde", oft-invoked by Zelensky in speeches: "Bucharest, Zagreb, Sarajevo, and Belgrade have all been variously proposed in recent years as intrinsically and quintessentially "European" (...) precisely because they stand at the frontier where European civilization encounters (and rebuffs) the barbarians to the east or south. We know what it means to be European, they all insist, because our Europeanness has for so long been under threat. We have sacrificed and suffered so that Europe, your Europe, might thrive and live. Why aren't you listening?"

This is anything but "decolonial" internationalism: it is the resentment over having been excluded from Western Europe's maritime great games. For first-wave postcolonial thinkers, poets, and soldiers in Africa and the Caribbean, "decolonizing the mind" meant outgrowing such inferiority complexes.

Instead of burning Pushkin, "postcolonial" intellectuals concerned about those who dread a Russian regional bully in their midst could better learn about the culture and politics of the Caucasus. What drove Kazakhstan workers' protests, which aroused Putin's paranoia before February 2022? Lenin had emphasised Central Asia's revolutionary relevance. But Stalin—himself a Georgian—punished the Caucasus with the restoration of the pre-revolutionary antics of the Tsar Alexander II, who extracted Caucasian resources while committing the today-forgotten Circassian genocide.

A spokeswoman for Circassian memory recently spoke at the Decolonize Russia regime-change conference hosted by the US government—tragically, there was no other audience or context until 2022. If the world forgot a genocide that had been designed by the Tsar, that fact only reinforces Chomsky's rule of "worthy and unworthy" victims. Of what strategic use was it during the Cold War to acknowledge the horrors of pre-Soviet Russia? Only now that Putin advocates Solzhenitsyn's "Holy Russia" ideology, may descendants of the Tsar's victims be heard at all, or "decolonized" from oblivion.[3]

The Black Diplomats firm, fronted by black Detroit-born Terrell Jermaine Starr, embodies yet another Frankenstein-like attempt to make the ideologies of "decolonial" and "Black Lives Matter" one and the same with Atlanticism. Starr's being "based between Kiev and Brooklyn" qualifies him as a "non-resident" fellow of the neo-con Atlantic Council.

"Black Diplomat's" rhetoric on Ukraine's right to NATO is smart "decolonial" PR. Listening to Terrell's charm-offensive, one might be tempted to forget the racism towards "the Golden Horde,"—which includes unfortunate Mongols like Tolstoy and Tchaikovsky. "Decolonize Ukraine" activists want us to forget how Western

colonialism was foundational to Western capitalism: an economic era that was postponed in East-Europe when it abandoned feudalism for Leninist revolution.

The false framing of Ukraine as a “postcolonial society”, not only glosses over the anachronistic “decommunization” campaigns Ukraine enforced in 2015 and which Zelensky—first popularly elected as a peace candidate—had initially criticized. These misplaced concepts open a Pandora’s box of territorial enmities in the wider region. Some other explosive ethno-national disputes in the region— called “irredentism” in geopolitical language— include Hungary’s claims over Romania’s “Magyar land”; Serb nostalgia over Kosovo; and the Greco-Macedonian quarrel over who are the legitimate descendants of the Macedonian Alexander the Great. Such imbecilic causes proliferate wherever efforts to unite the working class were maligned by Stalinism in the collective memory. Today’s ethno-nationalists, identifying as “colonized” men and women can also easily adopt “woke” “decolonial” language, “empowering” them to emancipate themselves from mental slavery by taking up the sword against old rivals and minorities.

Western pundits rarely think twice about what potentially misuses may ensue from misplaced campus jargon as they copy-paste extraneous values and concepts about power-relations, race, or gender, onto what would otherwise seem opaque foreign places. The newfound “decolonial” consciousness, shorn of context, too easily plays into the wrong hands.

### **Golden Arches Vs. Golden Horde**

The misuse of postcolonial terminology is now a standard PR strategy for Asian neoliberal authoritarian regimes who have grown accustomed to the red carpet rolled out for them by the West. Now, as Narendra Modi’s government censors the circulation of a damning BBC documentary about his past role as firebrand pogrom-leader in Gujarat, Bharatiya Janata Party militants issue one press release after another condemning the “colonial” disinformation campaign targeting the prime minister—“Some people in India still haven’t gotten over their colonial intoxication, they consider BBC above the Supreme Court of India,” said the BJP Law Minister, as others decried the “colonial mindset”. Turkey’s Erdogan resorts to similar devices to buffer Western criticism of his human rights violations, by saying things like “The West has preserved its grudge against Eastern societies, embodied by the Turks, under the name of orientalism.” Edward Said is rolling in his grave.

Like Yermolenko, these spokespersons speak two languages— the “anti-Orientalist” politically-correct language-structure, works for putting potential Western critics in their place. Erdogan’s decrying “orientalization” covers for his agenda of neo-Ottoman imperial revival.

Nationalists of the Balkans can meanwhile happily follow the Ukrainian example of proclaiming their “post-colonial” struggle against Turkey is as relevant now as it was in the 19th century. This might serve as another way of manufacturing consent around military escalations on the Aegean, or campaigns against neighbours, minorities and immigrants with a refurbished “postcolonial” narrative.

The breakup of the Ottoman empire, which of course had murdered millions of people, was no simple affair. It culminated in ethnic cleansings that by the 1920s had Greek nationalists expelling the Greek Muslim population, while the Turkey exiled Greek-speaking minorities “back” to Greece. These details went unnoticed by the pseudo-left caravan of the German artfair Documenta14, whose horde of curators invaded Athens in 2017. In an intended show of solidarity with Greeks shortly after their humiliation by Germany’s financial-political stranglehold in the EU, Documenta14 promoted “decoloniality” by refurbishing 19th century Greek Christian nationalist propaganda art as kitsch, while advocating for the Greek adoption of cultural values that are trending in Berlin.

Rebranding Greece a “postcolonial society” undermines genuine internationalism by working to the advantage nationalists who wish to exorcise, rewrite and erase evidence of their cultures’ having also been influenced by centuries within an Eastern empire. These plots differ in important ways from the Afro-Asian overthrow of colonial regimes in the mid 20th century.

The equivocation of zealous Atlanticism with decolonial, intersectional positions, invite us to forget NATO’s decades in Afghanistan. The revelation of a Western military narco-state in Afghanistan, and the gracelessness with which NATO failed to fulfil its professed aims of helping likely victims of the Taliban—now left to starve under Western sanctions—should reinforce our scepticism towards any claims of this technocratic regime wishing to “decolonize” anything. The European left could instead rally damaged Afghanistan-veterans alongside Afghan refugees to speak out against NATO’s rehabilitation.

The global left, meanwhile, bears responsibility in not pointing out the many misuses of its language by abovementioned neo-cons.

Despite these urgencies, the left has altogether abandoned thinking or theorizing about war—an observation often made by Italo-French philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato.

## **Conclusion**

To avoid ending up like Yermonlenko or Terrell, we would do well to turn back to the first wave of post-colonial and anti-colonial thinkers and fighters from Africa, Asia and Latin America—and liberate these early “decolonials” from the doldrums of university departments that stifle their power.[4] But these figures weren’t mere scholars: they were also soldiers and poets—such as Tunisia’s Albert Memmi, Martinique’s Eduard Glissant, Haiti’s and Cuba’s thinkers, El Salvador’s utopian Ignacio Ellacuría, and Ukraine’s Taras Shevschenko.

Alongside Kenyan writer Ngugi Wathiong’o’s much-abused manifesto exhorting us to “Decolonizing the Mind”—we could also recite Poland’s Czeslaw Milosz, who analyzed how the “captive mind” of his fellow East Europeans straightjacketed them in a “double bind” of believing themselves forced to choose whether they’d be subjects of the German West or the Russian East. Ukrainians and Ukrainophiles take note: the only “decolonial” path is non-alignment.

## References

[1] Lithub introduces the poem by blaming the West’s lack of familiarity with Shevschenko on “a reflection of the dominance of Russian colonializing narratives in the West...we have fostered the so-called “great” Russian literary tradition to the point that it dominates the Eastern European literary canon and cultural discourse, with the result that Ukrainian and other non-Russian literary voices have been silenced.” This woke language ignores the Cold War fame which writers like Czechs Vaclav Havel and Kundera enjoyed in the West. Whereas “problematic” Russian writers who were both socialist revolutionaries and dissidents against Stalinism—like Isaac Babel, and Yevgeny Zamyatin—were inconvenient for the Cold War’s purposes, to the extent that it might have gone unnoticed when Orwell used Zamyatin’s novel *We* as a model for his seminal 1984.

[2] In *When the Facts Change: Essays 1995-2010*

[3] Disney Co. has meanwhile recently removed/[cancelled its 1997 animation “Anastasia”](#) about princess Anastasia Romanova, suddenly no longer a “worthy victim”.

[4] Zizek has [argued](#) how literary theorist Homi K. Bhabha castrated Fanon to instrumentalise the Martiniquan psychiatrist and author of “The Wretched of the Earth” as an allegory for “BIPOC” professors’ personal tenure-battles in Western colleges.

## **Ukraine: Morality and Reality**

### **Ralph Leonard**

The Ukrainian question, which many governments and many “socialists” and even “communists” have tried to forget or to relegate to the deep strongbox of history, has once again been placed on the order of the day and this time with redoubled force .... The Ukrainian question is destined in the immediate future to play an enormous role in the life of Europe.

- Leon Trotsky

Six months after being invaded by Russia, Ukrainian society has suffered immensely and borne the majority of the costs of the war being waged against it. Numerous atrocities have been committed against civilians such as the massacre in Bucha. Terror bombing tactics used by Russia in Syria have also been applied in Ukraine. Cities such as Mariupol have experienced brutal sieges ever since the war started, and whole towns have been reduced to rubble. Mayors and other local officials who refused to cooperate with the Russian occupation have been executed. One-third of the population has been displaced, and tens of thousands of others forcibly deported to Russia. In the Donbas, tens of thousands of Ukrainian men have been forcibly drafted to fight for Russia’s proxy militias.

Ukraine has also been economically shattered by the war. Critical infrastructure has been wrecked across the country. Russian forces have seized vital Black Sea trading ports, the industrial and mining area of the Donbas, and important tracts of agricultural land in the south. Nearly a third of the civilian population has lost their jobs, and many households are surviving only on food relief and medical supplies delivered by volunteers.

And yet, despite this devastation and suffering, the Ukrainian willingness to resist the invasion, dismemberment, and subjugation of their country has not dissipated. Contrary to the sectors of “informed” opinion at the beginning of the war, which had simply taken it as given that the Russian army would steamroll its way into Kyiv and topple the Zelensky government with little effort, Ukraine has put up stern resistance. It has managed to beat back the Russian advance and inflict high casualties on Russia. This is in spite of many thousands of their own soldiers having lost their lives and the army being increasingly forced to rely on untrained and poorly equipped reserve units and civilian militias. Access to recently arrived NATO-supplied artillery and rocket launchers has provided the means to destroy Russian ammunition depots and command-and-control centers deep inside Russian-occupied territory. Just recently, Ukrainian forces managed to attack a Russian air

base deep within Russian-occupied Crimea, destroying numerous warplanes likely used to bomb Ukrainian towns and cities.

### **Idealists, Realists, and the Left**

Much of the debate surrounding the Ukraine war is really a quarrel between liberal internationalist idealism and realism. Liberal internationalism — the belief that liberal democratic capitalism should be spread across the world and the transnational institutions that undergird them should be upheld — seems to be the default ideology in foreign policy. Within mainstream ideology, its only formidable rival is realism (aka *realpolitik*). The simple difference between them is that, while liberal internationalism seeks to subjugate might to right, realism says that might *makes* right. In other words, liberals seek to use military, diplomatic, and economic power in service of morally just causes — “democracy promotion,” “humanitarian intervention,” etc. Conversely, realist statecraft is temperamentally conservative, having no faith in pursuing grand ideological projects or historical progress. The supreme objective of power should be to achieve the necessary conditions for security and stability in a chaotic world.

Liberal internationalists enthusiastically support Ukraine out of a fidelity to “European values” and a clarion call for the West to stand up to Vladimir Putin as a threat to liberal democracy and a “rules-based international order.” Indeed, their solidarity with Ukraine and embrace of the Ukrainian flag seemingly echoes the liberals and radicals in the 19th century who expressed solidarity with the cause of Poland and Greece against Tsarist and Ottoman domination, respectively, as well as Italian unification, at a time when bourgeois national movements in the wake of the American and French revolutions were a historically progressive force against feudalism. So, they take a “bourgeois defensist” position that, alongside heavy sanctions against Russia, demands that Ukraine should be supported, up to and including giving them heavy weapons, not just to defend themselves but also to overturn the Russian invasion and potentially land a conclusive defeat on Russia. The predominant realist position as articulated by John Mearsheimer, however, claims liberal internationalist overreach bears most of the responsibility for creating the current crisis. NATO and EU expansion into countries that share a border with Russia and the West’s support for pro-democracy movements in Ukraine in the 2004 Orange Revolution and 2014 Maidan Revolution, part of a strategy to entice Ukraine away from Russia’s “orbit” and integrate it into the West, needlessly provoked Russia. These actions ignored its “legitimate security concerns” and upset the balance of power, inevitably resulting in the Ukraine invasion. Therefore, instead of pouring arms into Ukraine, which only pours fuel on the flames, Western policy should choose the fire extinguisher of a negotiated peace settlement where accommodations to Russian grievances will have to be made.

On the Left, unsurprisingly, there is a general incoherence on the “Ukraine question.” At its worst, the tankie left — small but occasionally loud, mainly coalescing around publications such as *The Grayzone*, *MintPress*, and the grim alternative universe of sectarian Stalinism — openly justifies Russia’s invasion on the bogus grounds that it was a “special military operation” to protect the Russian-speaking minority in the Donbas and to “de-Nazify” the country. Being the Soviet nostalgists that they are, they robotically parrot Russian nationalist narratives masquerading as “Marxism-Leninism.” They rubbish reported and documented massacres such as in Bucha as “false flags” meant to give the West a *casus belli* to wage war on Russia and enflame Russophobia in global public opinion.

Furthermore, they regard any political expression of Ukrainian identity as “fascist” or “Neo-Nazi.” They don’t make any distinction between Ukrainian liberal nationalism — represented by Zelensky and his party, which defines Ukrainian citizenship in civic terms and believes Ukraine should be part of the European Union on a liberal democratic basis — and the ethnonationalism practiced by the Azov Battalion, the Right Sector, and Svoboda, all of whom have historical and ideological links to Ukrainian nationalist collaborators with the Nazi occupation of the 1940s. To them, it’s all the same thing. Ukrainians who oppose Russian attempts to dominate their country are all “Banderites.” The Maidan Revolution was really a US-instigated “regime change” operation. Like any propaganda worth its salt, this perspective exploits and weaponizes grains of truth in history to fit a tendentious ideological narrative. Of course, one would have to elide the fact that far more Ukrainians, whether as partisans or soldiers in the Red Army, fought against the Nazis (it wasn’t only Russians!). Moreover, they conveniently omit the existence of fascist and far-right Orthodox militias among the pro-Russian separatists, most of whom are ideologically descended from the White Army and Black Hundreds, the antisemitic counterrevolution against the Bolshevik Revolution.

A much wider section of the Left — represented by Noam Chomsky, Tariq Ali, Branko Marcetic, the DSA, and the editors of *New Left Review* — certainly condemn Russia’s invasion, but, like the realists, lay most of the blame for the crisis on the US for provoking Russia’s invasion with its buccaneering desire to increase its hegemony in Europe. They are disillusioned with liberal internationalists who they feel are turning a complex geopolitical question into a simple morality tale — the good West vs. evil Putin — that ultimately will serve as a veil for liberal militarism and the revitalization of Western hegemony.

Being that their *raison d’être* on this question is being “anti-war,” their main concerns are focused on the potential long-term consequences of flooding Ukraine with masses of weapons from various countries. Could those weapons end up in the wrong hands? Do they just prolong the war leading to more death and destruction

instead of leading to a resolution? Wouldn't a ceasefire and negotiation be a better resolution than the slim prospect of a Ukrainian victory?

Ben Burgis in an earlier essay for *Sublation*, Ukraine and the specter of Christopher Hitchens, laments the soft left for being insufficiently anti-war, for taking a supposedly "Hitchensian" path in banging the drums of war and labeling anti-war leftists as "pro-Putin." Instead of backing "escalatory" policies such as giving arms to Ukraine, which, as he sees it, in the worst-case scenario could put the whole world on the brink of a potential world war, Burgis advocates, as evidenced by his defense of Noam Chomsky's comments on Ukraine, a negotiated peace settlement between the leading powers.

### **The Price of Peace**

Understandably, there are good reasons to hope any war, including this one, ends with a negotiated settlement instead of a gruesome war of attrition or an existential fight to the finish. All wars, even the justest ones, carry an inherent brutality and destructiveness that spares no one. In the words of General Sherman (who was certainly no softie when it came to waging total war against the Confederacy), "its glory is all moonshine; even success, the most brilliant, is over dead and mangled bodies. . . [O]nly those who have never heard a shot, never heard the shriek and groans of the wounded and lacerated. . . cry aloud for more blood, more vengeance, more desolation."

However, if I may provoke you, should "peace" come at any price? What do we mean by "peace"? In a recent essay for *Dissent Magazine*, Anatol Lieven of the Quincy Institute makes the case for an "ethical realist" resolution to the war, to which I'm sure many leftists will be sympathetic. It "dictates a search for a peace settlement that would safeguard Ukrainian sovereignty and its ability to move toward the West, while giving Russia enough in territorial terms to allow Putin to claim victory and end the war." But this "solution" is built on a series of obvious contradictions. How can you "safeguard Ukrainian sovereignty and its ability to move toward the West" while "giving Russia enough in territorial terms to allow Putin to claim victory" when "victory" for Putin is precisely terminating Ukrainian sovereignty and its ability to pivot towards the West? How can you safeguard Ukrainian sovereignty but at the same time give territorial concessions to Russia in such a way that satisfies all parties? This is a fantasy that is neither "ethical" nor "realist" and that thinks you can make everyone happy to "end the war" without either side's objectives coming into conflict with each other.

When we talk about "peace," we need to be clear about what it actually entails. It seems that the "unethical" realists are more forthright in sketching out what they mean by "peace" and the consequences of it. That, for the sake of peace and stability,



Ukraine may have to concede its claims on land seized by Russia (which also includes Crimea), perhaps going up to and including a de facto partition in order to satisfy Russia's "legitimate security concerns" in its near abroad.

Lenin notoriously condemned treaties of this sort, based on "spheres of influences," as "agreements between robbers behind people's backs." A "peace settlement" that confirms Russian conquests and de facto partitions of Ukraine along crude ethnolinguistic lines would be no different and would be a boon for Russian revanchism. It's an obnoxious pseudo-peace erected on shoddy foundations. At best, it will be nothing more than a fragile truce until the next round of fighting. Any genuine "peace" is one that doesn't compromise Ukraine's self-determination and independence. One of the worst elements of this argument is the commonplace that Russia is the only actor that has "legitimate concerns" rooted in history and the dignity of its nation that deserve a hearing, as if Ukrainians' own concerns and grievances — very much rooted in history, with its relationship with Russia long being a semi-colonial one — are to be treated as a minor consideration at best.

War, as von Clausewitz famously exclaimed, is politics by other means. War *under capitalism* is very often politics by other means, and that is why capitalism is moribund and incapable of advancing humanity. Bourgeois society promises a world peace based on freedom, democracy, cooperation, wealth, and abundance for all of humanity. Yet, capitalism, with its frequent crises, creates the fertile soil that makes wars and Bonapartism more likely. War, fundamentally, is a symptom of political failure. Putin has been trying to achieve on the battlefield what he couldn't achieve at the negotiating table. He will only return to the negotiating table if his war in Ukraine can gain him sufficient leverage to get what he wants. This reveals that Putin is acting out of weakness and desperation, not strength. In this sense, the Ukraine war is a huge gamble for Putin. From his point of view, Russia's invasion *has to* succeed.

However, if Putin's military adventurism in Ukraine fails and is conclusively defeated before the eyes of the world, then some interesting and even modestly progressive developments could follow. His regime could go into crisis, ignite a popular uprising à la 1905 that could even spell its demise (and potentially the hideous regime in Belarus too). This is one reason to hope the Ukrainian resistance prevails beyond the preservation of Ukraine's national self-determination and democracy or giving Russian chauvinist revanchism a bloody nose.

To paraphrase Thucydides, war is evil, but submitting to the dictates of others is worse. Sometimes you have to fight, not because it's virtuous but because it's necessary. I recently wrote an essay for *Sublation* defending the right to bear arms for the socialist movement as part of the democratic inheritance from the bourgeois revolution. When faced with oppression, the people have the right to armed self-defense. It would be obscenely hypocritical of me to deny this basic democratic right

to Ukrainians when faced with an invading army bent on subjugating their country, including getting heavy weapons from outsiders. Although as a Marxist, the goal is ultimately to transcend nations altogether, Ukraine's right to national self-determination, the precondition of a democratic society, should be defended. Despite the many iniquities of Ukrainian internal politics, including corruption and wrecking workers' rights, these are the matters at stake. And no amount of obfuscation should blind one to it.

### **Barbarism and Chauvinism**

In the conspicuous absence of international struggle for socialism, wars and the barbarism and mutual chauvinisms that come with them are likely to become more frequent and more devastating. Today, the war is in Ukraine. Tomorrow, as it seems almost an inevitability, it will be over Taiwan. This is not something to be glib about, but one must keep it real. The Marxist Left is impotent; it can't actually intervene in the crisis to influence it in any way. So, what you have as a substitute is bloviating moralism, folk theories based on factoids and half-truths, and a resentful counterposing of Ukrainian suffering with the suffering of those from the Global South, none of which actually contributes to understanding the crisis and potentially politically intervening in it. Quite the opposite.

Overall, the danger in viewing the Ukraine war through the narrow prism of a "proxy war" contest between Russia and the West is that the most important elements of this conflict — Ukraine and the right of its people to freedom and self-determination — all but disappear from view. Furthermore, we may end up defending not what is vital for the people of Ukraine — democracy, liberty, self-determination — but whatever happens to be in the interests of Brussels or Berlin or Washington or Moscow or what is necessary to uphold a "balance of power," instead of overthrowing it. As should be obvious, the two do not correlate.

## **In Ukraine, Peace is Not Enough**

### **Agon Hamza**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine revived a series of problems which were lurking beneath the surface of the Left. Although it is nearly impossible to talk about the left as a whole, there are nevertheless some invariants which determine the state of the Left today made visible by the situation in Ukraine.

The left is going through a night of the living dead. It is predominantly comprised of forces which have no political efficiency in fighting to remain alive in the 'scene', and at the same time, it pretends to have an understanding of the political reality. This holds true for both political groups and intellectuals. This comes, in part, as a result of a necessary moment of the Western bourgeois expansion. In fact, it is quite an interesting sign - or symptom - of the place the left is in almost any given country today - it is composed of a strong middle class. This composition of the left makes it possible to explain quite a few of its characteristics, including its anti-Americanism, which in a large part is the constitutive element of the left today.

It is peculiar, or so it seems to me, that the anti-American sentiment has grown in the contemporary left in direct proportion to how western the Left itself has become. This middle class, which is leftist, has started to hate its own roots, so to speak, and the anti-American sentiment gets so prevalent, only because it proves that they are not *so* middle class as it seems. But this is not new. The leftist middle class usually, or as a rule, hate the middle class that it itself is, as if this exaggerated hate would *purge* it from its own social basis. In a way, the anti-Americans are negatively identified with America. It is because they know that this sentiment is constitutive of their identity that they turn to Putin, who, *until now*, they barely knew or understood.

What is truly interesting, I think, is to notice that none of the defences of Putin are wholehearted: it is always done from afar, from a certain safe distance. It seems that none of these defenders seem to know what they are doing, they only know that Russia is *not* America. The left has also supported Assad of Syria, Milošević of Serbia, insofar as these dictatorial individuals are anti-Americans. But, what is of crucial importance is that the anti-American position comes from an easy position, usually from a safe distance, which is all too easy to take. Many examples come to mind here, both in the political and the intellectual scene. The moment one takes the position of anti-Americanism, as the premise of intellectual, political or/and cultural labour, one loses the sight of the conceptual roots of Americanism, that is to say, one loses the ability to distinguish another "Americanism", such as Putinism, Erdoganism, and so on.

One of the most hypocritical positions regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the usual left-liberal litany of "terror only breeds more terror", "peace is crucial, the rest

can be solved afterwards”, “violence cannot be fought with violence.” The question is: *who* wants peace? I cannot think of one occupying force which doesn’t want peace – Israel, Russia, Serbia, even the Nazi Germany, they all *sincerely* want(ed) peace. But, in Ukraine, peace is not an option, as one great philosopher recently declared. Ukrainians do not want peace, they want liberation. Putin, as an invader, wants peace. All the calls for pacifism, or the positions which call for “peace at any cost” are not only depoliticising the cause(s), but ultimately, they are siding with the oppressing forces, be it in the case of the frontal war (like in Ukraine, or in the previous century in the Balkans), or in the other forms of class struggles in the field of economy, politics, culture, etc.

This said, there is always something problematic about returning to the ‘past’ in order to explain our present. One has to only think about the classic way of describing an ongoing difficult situation: one often hears (especially liberals) describing certain situations as “complex.” Russia invaded Ukraine and, according to pundits and peaceniks, we must take into account the “complexity” of the situation in that part of the world, which dates back many decades, if not centuries. I think this is an ideological cover up, which maintains that beyond every situation, there is a hidden element or a deeper meaning, which must be unveiled in order for us to understand current events on proper terms. I am inclined to argue that this very idea of a “deeper historical (or other) meaning” of a given situation is evoked to justify the present, in terms of its crimes, atrocities, and so forth.

Evoking the past is our inability or rather our unreadiness to confront the present. In a way, this is the lesson of Hegel’s thinking; given he is a superficial thinker, all his philosophy is dedicated to emptying out the “beyond” of any substance, doing away with all essentialist dualisms. With regard to Ukraine, the reality is rather simple: Russia invaded the country, has displaced tens of millions of people, and is apparently committing crimes against civilians who are clearly and deliberately targeted. The reality which should be considered is; it is Russia who started the war. Now, of course there are further complications, or “complexities” if you will, but they are no deeper or more complex than brutal “simple” facts.

We have heard similar approaches to the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. In order to understand what is happening in the former Yugoslavia, we must go back in history for centuries, we must understand their myths and customs. While being problematic on so many aspects (it is a region of philistines etc., etc), these approaches miss the real of a situation. Myths and other folkloric aspects served an ideological function: when the wars exploded, these myths were brought up (resurrected), to serve as an ideological supplement for what was happening in the present.

Astonishingly, some radical Marxists are arguing for “understanding Putin.” It gets even more bizarre when they call for a new politics of containment, and a new George F. Kennan for our era. It is astonishing to conceive the Russian Federation as a continuation of the Soviet Union. The present Russia is the absolute negation of everything that the Soviet Union stood for, even nominally. Putin, who recently became very fond of giving lectures on history, denounced both the Soviet Union and Lenin, thus distancing himself and the present Russia as far as possible that history. He blamed Lenin for creating the Ukrainian nation, and his attack is directed against the Ukrainian nation, which he refuses to recognise. As he said in February of this year, “Let’s start with the fact that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia, more precisely, by the Bolshevik, Communist Russia. This process began almost immediately after the 1917 revolution.” This is why Russia is not calling the invasion as “war”, but it refers to it as a “special military operation.”

V.I. Lenin was very clear about this, and his book on the right to self-determination is worth recalling and rereading in our predicament, especially with regard to Ukraine. He argues that “those who fail to demand freedom of secession for Finland, Poland, the Ukraine, etc., etc. — are behaving like chauvinists, like lackeys of the blood-and-mud-stained imperialist monarchies and the imperialist bourgeoisie.” This is an incredible aspect of Lenin’s vision: his staunch anti-chauvinistic positions, which are clearly the very opposite of the existing regime in Russia. His demand to the proletariat was explicit: they have to demand the right of political secession for the colonies and for the nation that “its own” nation oppresses. Unless this is done, any form of internationalism will remain only a meaningless phrase. Class solidarity between workers of the oppressing and oppressed nations, argues Lenin, will be impossible under such circumstances.

This said, one must always be extremely careful about drawing lines of comparisons. In the former Yugoslavia, the war exploded because of the hegemonic aspirations of the Republic of Serbia, which was in fact the reason for the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. One must also be careful with “similarities”, because at one level, everything might be made to resemble something else. This holds for politics, for theory, for culture, and so forth. The mere fact that Putin is referring to the Kosovo war as a “justification” for his invasion of Ukraine speaks about the incompatibilities of two cases.

The war in Ukraine is still ongoing and it doesn’t look like it will end anytime soon. It will go on for many months, if not years. It is quite difficult, if not impossible to predict the outcome of any situation. The situation is open and the war goes on, the situation will not get more peaceful, or riskless. As a result of this, we are faced with a real catastrophe, which will only be accelerated. What plays a very important role, however, is the positioning. It is no news to say that the Left is utterly disoriented and lost within its own terrain. It has been said that the Left never misses a chance to

miss a chance. The on-going war in Ukraine and the positioning of the Left in that war will have long consequences for the Left itself.

## **Revolution without the Risks: Enjoying the Adventures of Yevgeny Prigozhin**

**Benjamin Studebaker**

When the leader of the Wagner Group—Yevgeny Prigozhin—began his march on Moscow, the internet lit up like a Christmas tree. It didn't matter that Prigozhin had been in bed with Vladimir Putin for twenty years running. In the 00s, Prigozhin's catering company served Putin food. In 2014, Prigozhin put down one butcher's knife and picked up another. Now his private contractors serve Putin slices of Ukraine. But for the good people of the internet this history was unimportant. By leading a rebellion against Putin, Prigozhin became the prince that was promised, the revolutionary figure who would transform Russia and finally bring the conflict to a close.

Prigozhin was not a mercenary or a liberal—he was from the very start an integral part of Putin's inner circle. His feud with the minister of defense, Sergei Shoigu, escalated to the point that the two men no longer felt they could get along. Each tried to get Putin to remove the other. The only question was who would overtake whom. The ministry of defense ordered the Wagner Group to subordinate itself to the Russian military by the end of June. Prigozhin refused to sign the deal. He accused the ministry of defense of attacking his forces—something western sources have yet to confirm—and began his march on Moscow.

Ultimately it was the president of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko, who persuaded Prigozhin to go into exile. Like Prigozhin, Lukashenko has been a personal friend of Putin for decades. When the news dropped that Prigozhin cut a deal with Lukashenko, all the enthusiasm online evaporated. Prigozhin was no revolutionary. He was in a no-win situation. If he subordinated the Wagner Group to the MoD, those incompetent buffoons would give him suicidal orders. If he persisted in refusing the MoD's orders, the MoD itself would have him arrested or killed. He rebelled not to revolutionize Russia but to save himself and his men from a defense ministry he doesn't trust with his life or theirs. Once he realized he could get out of Ukraine and make himself safe in Belarus, he jumped at the chance to stay alive.

This was intensely disappointing for the terminally online westerner not just because the westerner cares about the fate of Ukraine and despises Putin. It was disappointing because for a fleeting moment, Prigozhin raised their hopes that revolution might be possible. In Prigozhin, the internet thought it saw the kind of historical figure long believed to be extinct—a man with armed followers and a revolutionary consciousness. What's more, this man was not from Cambodia or the Congo. He was not associated with political Islam. He was a white man speaking a European language.

The online westerner could identify with this revolutionary figure without themselves having to do anything revolutionary. Safe behind the screen, the revolution could be watched and enjoyed without any of its attendant dangers. Unlike say, January 6th, the westerner was free to support this rebellion without incurring any moral censure. For the liberal centrist, nationalism is verboten—unless it is nationalism on behalf of Ukraine. In the same way, revolution is an assault on all the institutions we are meant to hold dear—unless it is committed in Russia against Putin. When discussing Ukraine—and only when discussing Ukraine—the liberal subject is free from the straightjacket of having to be a liberal, able to endorse all of the things that in any other context cannot be tolerated.

Prigozhin's personal background had to be ignored so that it was possible to imagine oneself at his side. His Wikipedia page was, at every moment, there available for the online westerner's reading pleasure. But reading it—or taking it seriously—would ruin the fun. This felt like history, and these days history is such an infrequent visitor that it feels like a missed opportunity if you turn it away.

Deep down, the online westerner pines for revolution in Russia in part because we no longer believe in our own system. Yet, at the same time, we cannot imagine another political system that would be worth dying for. Our faith in the capacity of human beings to build better societies has been ground down by the experience of failed revolutions. So, a revolution in Russia gives us what we want in a double sense—it allows us to have the revolution we can no longer have for ourselves, and it reinforces the sense that the western system is inevitable, that all other systems eventually succumb to it. If our system is inevitable, it doesn't matter how many legitimate criticisms we may have of it—we have to tolerate it. Any alternative we might cook up must immediately be likened to the phantoms of the past—the Soviet Union or the Third Reich—and thrown in the trash can of history. But we are allowed to enjoy the fall of alternative political systems, to enjoy the process of political and economic homogenization as it unfolds.

What will happen if we get what we say we want, and all the countries of the world become liberal capitalist democracies? Who will have the revolutions for us? Who will let us imagine that history might yet come to someone's dinner table again, if not to ours? In this period where our system seems inevitable but is not yet truly universal, the dying alternatives delay our confrontation with the reality that our own system prevails only because it is the most competitive. The rich liberal capitalist democracies endure because they have the most competitive militaries, the most productive workers with the greatest propensity to consume. They don't prevail because they are happy societies full of mentally healthy people.



On the contrary, people like Putin consistently underestimate the western states precisely because these states are so visibly miserable. Our states can no longer raise enough tax revenue to adequately fund our public services. Increasingly our people struggle to secure the basics. Housing, healthcare, and education grow ever more expensive, even though you can now buy a 4k television at Costco for a clean \$300. The jobs we do feel so pointless that we would gladly root for artificial intelligence to rid us of them, were these jobs not our only means of paying rent. We increasingly scream at one another about every cultural issue under the sun rather than deal directly with any of our economic problems, because deep down we know we can't use capitalist democracy to make our lives better. In Russia, this level of visible misery would have to come alongside revolution. It astounds the Russians that our system can just go on like this. And yet, it can and does, in part because of their example. They are the rotting corpse of the Soviet Union, and we do not want to end up like them. We'd just like to watch their revolution on Twitter.

## The Russian Kopi Luwak

### Slavoj Žižek

“Kopi luwak” is the world’s most expensive coffee, and it’s made from poop: from coffee beans that are partially digested and then pooped out by the civet, a catlike creature that lives in Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. The civet’s digestive enzymes change the structure of proteins in the coffee beans, which removes some of the acidity to make a smoother cup of coffee. It is mostly produced in Indonesia. In the US, a cup of kopi luwak can cost up to \$80.[1]

Is today’s new Right populist ideology, in the US as well as in Russia, not precisely a kind of ideological kopi luwak? Old ideas, some of them even respectable (like the critique of financial elites exploiting ordinary people), are processed by today’s apes and turned into shit.

So is the best metaphor of today’s Russian and Belarussian ideological propaganda not that of their leaders and ideologists as civets gulping down some noble parts of our emancipatory tradition (anti-Fascist and anti-racist struggle, rejection of our commercialized and hedonistic way of life, fight against financial elites, the efforts to abolish leftovers of colonization, etc...), allowing their neo-Fascist digestive enzymes to remove the radical acidity of the emancipatory tradition they swallowed so that this tradition is pooped out as pieces of shit which smoothly fit the existing global system although they present themselves as its destruction? Lukashenko recently urged “forgetful Europe” to go through a moral cleansing for the (Fascist) sins of its grandfathers and fathers [2]; however, the actual intention of this moral call is to get rid of the radical emancipatory tradition that forms the core of Europe. No wonder such calls for moral cleansing lead up to undistilled outbursts of pure destructive rage.

As Peter Sloterdijk pointed out, at the beginning of European civilization, there is Homer’s *Iliad* which opens with the line on wrath:

*“Achilles’ wrath, to Greece the direful spring / Of woes unnumber’d, heavenly goddess, sing!”* (another translation: *“Rage-Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles, murderous, doomed, / that cost the Achaeans countless losses.”*)

Will then the first line of a poem about Europe’s end be: “Sing the rage of Russia’s President Putin, murderous, doomed, that cost the Europeans countless losses”?

Recent public events in Russia brought out a name of this rage: on a big gathering in Red Square to celebrate the annexation of parts of Ukraine to Russia, the actor and

singer Ivan Okhlobystin gave an inflammatory speech which ended with:

*“We should call it a Holy War! Holy War! There is an ancient word in Russian: Goida. Goida is a call to immediate action. We need a war cry like that today! Goida, brothers and sisters! Goida! Fear us, people of the old world! Devoid of beauty, devoid of faith, devoid of wisdom! A world run by madmen, perverts and Satanists! Fear us – WE ARE COMING! GOIDA!!!”* (Everyone should take a look at this horror: “GOIDA! Russians advocate for dialogue and reason! Ivan Okhlobystin - YouTube.”)

Gojda means, especially today: Let’s go! Don’t think, just obey and do it! It is not just an ancient Russian word but a word that was a battle call of *oprichniki*, the private army of Ivan the Terrible known for terrorizing his (real and imagined) enemies, so it clearly implies ruthless terror, torture, and killing. Incidentally, the only speech similar in tone to Okhlobystin’s is the infamous Goebbels’s “total war” speech in Berlin in early 1943, after the Stalingrad defeat. Indeed, a world of madmen, perverts, and Satanists devoid of beauty, faith, and wisdom, is quite an adequate description of Putin’s world. Although one must add that the Red Square celebration was a fake event: the crowd was mostly composed of state officials brought there by busses, and most of them reacted to Okhlobystin’s speech with no enthusiasm, just with indifference and fear (applause and shouts were added later by the TV studio).

This, however, should not deceive us: the fact that the calls to war of Putin and his clique are not supported by the majority makes them potentially even more dangerous: as we all know (and fear), such a desperate situation may lead them to trigger a global war in order to maintain power. How this “Gojda!” will look was instantly made clear by general Sergei Surovkin, a new commander of the Russian forces in Ukraine: destroying with rockets infrastructures of big cities and indiscriminately killing civilians (the same thing Surovkin did in Aleppo when he was “liberating” Syria). There is an unsurpassable irony in the fact that in Slovene (and some other Slavic languages), “surov” means “raw, brutal, cruel”...

However, although today’s Russia is arguably the purest case of ideological kopi luwak, we should avoid the fateful trap of constraining it to Russia and its allies. Are the Trumpian neo-cons not offering a similar version of kopi luwak? And, to go to the end, was the noblest liberal-democratic ideology often also not processed by our civets to legitimize global capitalist exploitation and “humanitarian” military interventions? We are all in this shit, not only up to our knees but – if I am allowed to conclude with a tasteless metaphor – up to our asses.

## References

[1] The Disturbing Secret Behind the World's Most Expensive Coffee (nationalgeographic.com).

[2] 'Forgetful Europe' urged to go through moral cleansing (belta.by).

## **Nothing Ever Happens**

### **Stefan Bertram-Lee**

People watch fascinated as a column of Wagner mercenaries slowly climbs north, a bloody disaster ready and primed. They get most of the way there and decide to turn back, some of their demands apparently acceded to, after intervention from possibly the most boring of the Post Soviet countries, Belarus. Everyone is terribly disappointed. Subsequently the Russian state has taken slow gradual action to limit the Wagner Group. The column was cheered on by western liberals and Russian exiles, despite its right wing characteristics and Wagner's war crimes, while others wished to see a final end to Prigozhin and his mercenaries. Everyone left disappointed as the situation was resolved peacefully. People thought things were finally 'happening', that there was no way back, that we had stepped over the precipice into a whole new world, but instead found once again a settling with new realities and continuing on 99% as before.

If there is one indictment of the present world it is that tens of thousands of men have been killed in Ukraine since last November and nothing of significance has happened. Since the recapture of Kherson there's been no real change. The Russians conducted a campaign against Ukraine's energy infrastructure. This failed, in that it did not drive Ukraine to surrender, but did not fail spectacularly, in that it heavily damaged Ukraine's energy infrastructure and made civilian life significantly worse. The Russians captured Bakhmut, a minor speedbump on the way to Slovyansk, but took eight months to do so and they paid a great price in blood and iron. While the Russians were waging an eight month war for a city of 70,000, the Ukrainians were constantly delaying their counteroffensive, in large part because they were flooding more and more resources into defending this city of 70,000. The offensive finally began in early June, armed with all sorts of fancy NATO equipment, and weeks in has still not reached the first line of Russian fortifications. Russia fans constantly think that Putin is going to 'take off the gloves' and then finally, things will begin. Ukraine fans think that with the newest fanciest NATO weapons they're sure to take Crimea in a week, and then have to get hyped over taking 10 villages in a month at the cost of thousands of young men. The reality is that there are no gloves to take off, no wunderwaffen soon to arrive that will revolutionise circumstances, things are 'happening' as much as they will.

But for the 'happeners' that there would be a great dynamism of events in Ukraine, a constantly shifting and changing landscape of exhilarating events, was taken for granted, and much more was dreamed, a transformation of everyday life outside of the conflict zone. Tanks would be in Berlin by the end of the week, we would all perish in a nuclear holocaust, the power would go off and we would be left in the darkness and the cold. To our great disappointment, life just continued on as before.

Well, as before, but perhaps, 30% poorer. Another 'happening' that was meant to lead to fireworks was the economic sanctions on Russia, expected to drive the country back to the stone age. People cheered as middle class Russians in St.Petersburg were suddenly unable to use Apple Pay to get on the subway, but there was no grand collapse. The Russian economy shrunk, but so did the European one. Almost a year and a half later the British economy seems frozen in stagflation as the Russian economy recovers. Even in Ukraine the economy did not 'collapse', it has been disastrously reduced, but daily life for the well to do in Kiev remains the same. Neither Ukraine or Russia have transformed in a war economy, and Ukraine is poised to, under western guidance, privatise what remains of the state economy. Life grinds on, and so does capitalism. Things do happen, they just happen gradually, and in the absence of a working class movement, for the worst.

There was at least one revolution of everyday life in the past few years, the COVID pandemic and the lockdowns that were meant to contain its spread. But as a disaster COVID and the reaction to it was really quite insipid. No one was being welded inside their apartment - rather we were just subjected to a series of seemingly almost random rules, which constantly shifted around, varied from place to place, and were often entirely unenforced. The killing off of 0.3% of the British population is notable, but didn't change anything fundamental, though it was helpful in reducing the pension burden as COVID scythed through the oldest. Then after everything, everything went back to how it was, things just pushed a little further down the road we're going anyway, from WFH to state authoritarianism.

Things used to happen though, right? Great and mighty events sped by at an immense pace back then, right? There were 1287 days between the storming of the Bastille and the execution of Citizen Louis Capet, there were 1910 days between the October Revolution and the proclamation of the USSR. By comparison the painfully slow war in Ukraine has only gone on for 493 days (dated 2/7/23), and there were only 420 days between the first UK lockdown and the lifting of the last measures. It might have felt like an eternity, but it really wasn't. Our conception of the past is compressed, while the present stretches onwards with a decided slowness. We imagine the great events of the past as moments in time, but the storming of the Winter Palace did nothing to collectivise the land in Nizhnekamsk, and the process of transforming the first event into the second involved long grey meticulous work, as well as a great deal of luck and violence. The problem that we have now is not that things go terribly slow, the transformation of everyday life has always been slow, the problem is that *we* can't even start.

The defeat of the working class movement makes it impossible for anything contrary to the capitalist march to even begin, and we are instead just left to constantly settle for a worsening of conditions, for a march towards total oblivion. But it's going to be a slow march, there won't be some grand moment when things 'happen', when

things 'collapse'. Climate change is dreamt of as the thing which can finally make things 'happen', which will finally wake up the people, and lead to whatever fringe politics you happen to have becoming mainstream. Those who most enthusiastically denounce 'ecocide' are the ones who are excited by it, who anticipate it, long for it. If we found some technical solution to climate change they would be bitterly disappointed, especially if it came with a lack of pain. Sadly, it seems increasingly that we will not find a technical solution, but this just means that in the absence of the working class movement there will be no 'political solution', or perhaps better put, it will be hard to distinguish between the 'political' solution put about by the capitalists and the 'natural' development of climate change under the dictatorship of the capitalists. That the 'solution' to climate change demanded by liberal ecoactivists will have the same deleterious effects on working people as the 'natural' effects of capitalist produced climate change, is something which has gone from implicit to explicit in recent years, as ideas of 'Zero Growth' and 'Degrowth' are normalised with their clique.

In another era these green activists, who struggled against the construction of high speed rail and nuclear power plants, would be worse than the normal capitalist factions, as the capitalists were fundamentally committed to growth. But among an intensive general crisis of profitability, as well as a more or less continual economic crisis for the past 15 years, capitalists increasingly find their profits not in the expansion of industry, but from the 'negative' part of the capitalist cycle and from direct state support. Two impressive tactics have been used by contemporary American capitalists in the past few years to make money. One is getting massive state loans, and then not paying them back, and having them forgiven, especially prominent during and after the COVID pandemic. The other is 'Venture Capitalists' buying failing companies, and making them fail harder, paying themselves whatever money these companies have left, selling off everything, and then declaring the company bankrupt. This emphasis on ruin of production, and continual state provision ties the capitalists very closely to the liberal climate activist. The plans of the greens normally involve both the downgrading of production and the spending of eye watering sums. As money is nothing other than congealed labour these desires are inherently contradictory, and can only be reconciled through a further intensification of exploitation in the few remaining areas of profitable production. The demands for 'degrowth' are very similar to the demands for the 'abolition of the family' by those who think they are radical, all they are demanding is exactly what is already happening, they scream and shout and demand from the state and capital exactly what the state and capital is already doing. Perhaps they will be able to make things go a little faster but nothing more than that, as again, they do not have a mass working class movement with them.

We dream of things becoming terribly worse in a sharp shocking moment, but the reality is that the world is going to become terrible just ever so slowly. The War in

Ukraine has added to both things, we have been given a new list of terrible disasters to lust after, while what is actually happening is a slight acceleration of our immiseration, a slight increase in the global death rate and so on and so on. Until a mass working class movement can be resurrected we can't turn this around and start to improve things, but even if we did so we shouldn't expect everything to change overnight, the revolution will involve plenty of paperwork too.